USDA United States Department of Agriculture | Forest Service | West Fork Ranger District | 6735 West Fork Rd. Darby, MT 59829 406-821-3269

File Code: 1950-1
Date: March 5, 2007

Dear Interested Party:

I would like to ask for your comments on several proposed actions on the West Fork Ranger District in an area called Lower West Fork, generally between Trapper Creek – Job Corps and the Nez Perce Fork road junction (vicinity map and scoping maps 1-4). The analysis area encompasses nearly 35,200 acres. This letter begins the formal coordination and public scoping process.

What is the origin of this proposal?

The Lower West Fork Project area, which is located in the Lower West Fork Bitterroot River drainage, is one of several areas on the Bitterroot National Forest identified as high priority for interface fuel reduction work through the Bitterroot Community Wildfire Protection Plan (DNRC et al., 2005) www.bitterrootfireplan.org. Priority setting was based primarily on forest and fuel conditions, population density, and buildings and other improvements. The Lower West Fork Project is designed to respond to goals and objectives of the Community Plan, National Fire Plan, and the Bitterroot Forest Plan. Thus, helping move the project area towards desired future conditions described in these plans. Currently, all proposed actions occur in 1987 Bitterroot Forest Plan Management Areas 1 (Timber Emphasis), 2 (Winter Range Emphasis), 3a (Partial Retention), and part of one prescribed fire unit in 8a (Minimum Level).

What is the purpose of the project?

The purpose and need for the projects is not new to the Forest Service or the community. The Lower West Fork Project is being designed after the successful Frazier Interface Project (2003) [map 1], which has been recently implemented following the collaborative work of the Forest Consensus Council (FCC). The Council consisted of people with different backgrounds and interests who seek common ground and consensus around natural resource issues in the Bitterroot Valley. Additionally, the Lower West Fork project complements fuels reduction efforts taken on by the Triple Creek Ranch over the last several years and the recent School Point Ecoburn project (2006) just to the southwest [map 4].

The treatments are needed to: 1) Reduce fuel loading and lower crown fire hazard in low elevation ponderosa pine/Douglas-fir forests; 2) Improve forest health and stand resilience to natural disturbances (fire, insects, disease); 3) Maintain or increase the species composition of

at risk[1] shade intolerant species (aspen, ponderosa pine); 4) Maintain and improve the health and resilience of large diameter (≥21" dbh) ponderosa pine trees to fire, competition, and pathogens; 5) Create stand conditions that would provide large trees in the future; 6) Improve landscape condition class; and 7) Improve overall watershed and fisheries conditions.

We intend to maintain detailed information on the Bitterroot National Forest website including images of existing conditions, similar completed or on-going projects, and examples of desired future conditions. Copy the following link to your browser: www.fs.fed.us/r1/bitterroot , then select (one click) – "Projects & Plans" from the Bitterroot NF Home menu (left-side of page), then scroll down to select (one click) - "Lower West Fork Project Proposal". However, this site may not be available for reasons beyond our control.

What are the components of the project?

Vegetation and Hazardous Fuel Management

The West Fork Ranger District is proposing vegetation management treatments to reduce crown fire hazard, treat fuels, and improve forest health in the Lower West Fork area. Our proposed action is designed to reduce the potential impacts of a wildfire by increasing the likelihood that future wildland fires would burn on the forest floor as opposed to the tree crowns. This would make conditions safer for firefighters and better protect private property in the area.

A variety of mechanical, commercial and non-commercial methods would be employed. Thinning treatments will increase crown spacing favoring ponderosa pine and the largest, healthiest trees. This will reduce risk to stand-destroying wildfire and improve forest health by making stands more resilient to insects and disease. The proposed commercial treatments include thinning from below; removal of individual dead, dying and diseased trees; and creating small openings where regenerating hardwoods or creating disruptions in selected forest to reduce crown fire. Commercial forest thinning activities may be followed by (1) thinning of small, non-commercial understory trees with removal and utilization; and /or (2) slashing / thinning of small, non-commercial understory trees; either treatments including hand piling; and prescribed fire. It is expected that treatments would reduce the overstory canopy between 20-60%, depending upon existing conditions.

Other proposed vegetation treatments include non-commercial thinning. Again, this may include: (1) thinning of small, non-commercial understory trees with removal and utilization; and /or (2) slashing / thinning of small, non-commercial understory trees; either treatments including hand piling and pile burning; and prescribed fire underburning.

No new major permanent road construction is planned for the Lower West Fork project (see #5 in the watershed and fisheries improvement section). However, existing road maintenance will occur in association with approved management, and some temporary roads may be necessary to harvest some units.

The proposed vegetation management activities include [maps 1-4]:

---

[1] The Northern Regional Overview identified significant ecological indicators of risk to forest ecosystems including (1) the loss of species composition at the cover type level and changes in landscape distributions (2) stand level structure as measured by density and seral stage/size class distribution (USDA, 1998).

- Forest thinning (commercial) of predominantly ponderosa pine / Douglas-fir stands using tractor and / or skyline harvesting (approximately 1,021 acres)

- Non-commercial thinning of young forest stands (approximately 453 acres)

- Prescribed burning, that may be preceded by slashing of small trees (≤ 10" dbh), hand piling, pile burning, and underburning (approximately 2,320 acres)

- Small[2] patch cuts **within** units to create a fuel break where the combination of topography and fuel will make it effective and / or to regenerate aspen/lodgepole pine (approximately 4 units totaling 680 acres). Commercial thinning may also occur within these units. These treatments would include commercial harvest.

Watershed and Fisheries Management

Watershed and fisheries projects are proposed separately from the proposed vegetation management actions and include existing road re-alignment, existing road decommissioning, existing road storage, culvert removal and culvert replacement for fish passage, and spot graveling. Road decommissioning and storage have the additional benefit to improve wildlife habitat effectiveness, especially for Rocky Mountain elk, through strategic reduction of road densities. Recent road stabilization actions continue to be accomplished in the vicinity through the Nez Perce Watershed Restoration and Travel Management project decision (1997).

Where proposed vegetation treatments overlap proposed watershed and fisheries projects, watershed and fisheries actions would be planned for implementation either concurrently with, or after, the vegetation treatment. A road may be used to access vegetation treatment(s) and then decommissioned or stored.

The official definition for a 'decommissioned' road is that it no longer remains as part of the official *transportation* system. 'Stored' roads remain on the transportation system after the appropriate stabilization and /or rehabilitation has been completed. Decommissioned roads are usually identified as no longer needed and dropped from the transportation system. Treatments (on-the-ground) on a stored or decommissioned road can be identical. Stored or decommissioned road rehabilitation may simply involve closure and natural regeneration, provided no additional watershed stabilization work is necessary. Stored or decommissioned roads may or may not have rehabilitation designed to allow acceptable Off Highway Vehicle use. This will depend upon assessment of current approved uses.

The proposed watershed and fisheries management activities include [maps 1-4]:

1. Replace seven fish barrier culverts with fish-passable structures. The new structure could be a larger culvert, an open-bottomed arch, or a bridge. After installation of the new structure, the road crossing would be spot graveled.

---

[2] The majority of these treatments are predicted to be 4 to 6 acres and less than 10 acres.

1) Lavene Creek, lower crossing of FDR 5630 [map 4]
2) Lavene Creek, middle crossing of FDR 5630 [map 4]
3) Lavene Creek, upper crossing of FDR 5630 [map 4]
4) Ward Creek, lower crossing of FDR 373 [map 4]
5) Ward Creek, upper crossing of FDR 373 [map 4]
6) Britts Creek, FDR 49 [map 3]
7) Castle Creek, middle crossing of FDR 49 [map 3]

2. Remove two fish barrier culverts. Restore the natural shape of the stream channel at the site of the former road crossings. Build an ATV ford on the FDR 13411 crossing of East Piquett tributary 2.0.

1) Pierce Creek, FDR 13466 [map 1]
2) East Piquett tributary 2.0, FDR 13411 [map 2]

3. Spot gravel three road crossings of fish-bearing streams:

1) Piquett Creek, FDR 49 [map 2]
2) Piquett Creek, FDR 5720
3) Baker Creek, FDR 363 [map 1]

4. Two fish movement screens, one on the irrigation ditch on Ward Creek [map 4], and one on the Baker Creek ditch near the Forest boundary [map 4]. Unscreened ditches are capable of diverting and trapping both upstream and downstream moving fish. Fish swim into the ditches and cannot find their way back to the stream.

5. Potential road/intersection realignments at two junctions: (1) the intersection of FDRs 373 and 5632 near Ward Creek; and (2) the intersection of FDRs 5630 and 5630-A near Lavene Creek. In both instances, roads switchback across the stream twice in very short distances. This has created two fish barrier culverts within 50 feet of each other on both Ward and Lavene Creeks. If we are able to realign these two intersections, we will need to build a short distance of new permanent road at both locations. However, we would also be obliterating a short distance of existing road. The amount of new construction versus the amount of obliteration would result in no net gain of 'new' road.

6. Maintenance and repairs on four existing closed roads (13434, 13464, 13837,74321) to stabilize sediment sources (not mapped).

7. Store approximately 17.5 miles of existing roads. Existing roads stored after their use in the proposed Lower West Fork project amount to approximately 10.7 miles. There are approximately 7 miles of road to be stored that are not associated with other Lower West Fork treatments.